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A focus on pleasure? Desire and disgust in group work with young men

Ester McGeeney*

Centre for Innovation and Research in Childhood and Youth, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK

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There are a number of persuasive arguments as to why sexual pleasure should be included in sexual health work with young people, including the suggestion that this would provide young people with accounts of gender and sexuality that are more critical and holistic than those presented in the popular media, pornography and current sex education curricula. This paper considers the possibilities for engaging young men in critical group work about sexual pleasure in research and education contexts, drawing on a mixed-methods study of young people's understandings and experiences of 'good sex'. The paper provides a reflexive account of one focus group conducted with a group of heterosexual young men and two youth educators. It explores some of the challenges to building relationships with young men and creating 'safe spaces' in which to engage in critical sexuality education in socially unequal contexts. In this case study, adult-led discussion elicits rebellious, 'hyper-masculine' performances that close down opportunities for critical or reflective discussion. Although there are some opportunities for critical work that move beyond limited public health or school-based sex education agendas, there is also space for collusion and the reinforcement of oppressive social norms. The paper concludes by imagining possibilities for future research and practice.

Keywords: masculinity; sex education; young people; sexual pleasure; focus groups

Introduction

For over three decades, researchers and practitioners have argued that sexual pleasure should be included in sexuality education and sexual health services for young people (Fine 1988; Ingham 2005; Centre for HIV and Sexual Health 2009; Allen and Carmody 2012). Broadly, these arguments suggest that a more positive and holistic model of sexual health that foregrounds the emotional and physical pleasures of sex and relationships, would produce more favourable and gender equitable sexual health outcomes for young people. Much of this work has focused on the benefits of including pleasure in sex education programmes for young women, arguing that this would enable educators to create 'safe spaces' (Fine 1988, 35) in which young women could explore the 'discourses of desire' that researchers have frequently observed to be 'missing' from sexuality curricula and classroom practices. Increasingly, however, critics have argued that the inclusion of pleasure in sex education and sexual health services could also be potentially transformative for young men by creating opportunities for them to explore accounts of gender and sexuality that are more critical, diverse and equitable than those presented in popular media, pornography and current sex education curricula (Allen 2005; Beasley 2008).

Drawing on a study of young people's understandings and experiences of 'good sex' in London, England, this paper considers the possibilities and challenges of engaging young

*Current affiliation: Brook, Bristol, UK. Email: ester.mcgeeney@brook.org.uk

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men in the ‘pleasure project’ in research and education contexts. The paper focuses on one focus group that I conducted as part of a broader mixed-methods study with a group of young, heterosexual men, a youth worker and a sexual health outreach worker. In the paper, I provide a reflexive account of this group interaction as a way of exploring what it means to ‘work with men and boys’ and engage them in critical discussion of gender and sexuality. What happens when you put together a group of young men and ask them to talk with each other and with adult professionals about ‘good sex’ and sexual pleasure? Why would a researcher or a practitioner want to do this and what would be the challenges and benefits of doing this for young people, for researchers and for practitioners?

The pleasure project

Twenty-five years ago, Michelle Fine (1988) used an ethnographic study of young people in New York High Schools to argue that there was a ‘missing discourse of desire’ in the US public education system. In this influential article, Fine offers an analysis of the public discourses of sexuality that characterise debates about sex education in the USA, summarised as *sex as violence*, *sex as victimisation*, *sex as individual morality* and the *discourse of desire*. Fine argues that whilst the first three discourses are in abundance in US secondary schools, the fourth is largely ‘missing’ from ‘official’ sex education curricula and from sex education classrooms. This framing of sexuality (around risk the risks of male sexual violence, unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection) means that young women are educated ‘as the actual and potential victims of male desire’ (Fine 1988, 32), encouraged to say ‘no’ to sex and protect themselves from its potentially harmful consequences, rather than explore and understand their sexual bodies and desires.

Although the ‘discourse of desire’ seldom appeared in US school classrooms, Fine found that it frequently emerged in her conversations with her young female participants – ‘drop outs’ from a public high school. For example, there was Betty, who said, ‘I don’t be needin’ a man who won’t give me no pleasure but take my money and expect me to take care of him’ (Fine 1988, 35). Fine argues that for these young women, ‘sexual victimization and desire coexist’ (35) to produce sexual meanings and experiences that defy the victimisation thesis. In the context of social ambivalence about female desire that separates the female sexual agent from the female sexual victim, Fine argues that young women need access to safe spaces in which to explore their desires and to develop a subject position from which they can negotiate the pleasures *and* dangers that they face in their everyday lives and relationships (Vance 1984). Without access to these spaces to develop an empowered sexual subjectivity, Fine argues, young women are more vulnerable to unwanted or unsafe sexual activity and sexual violence (Fine 1988; Holland et al. 1998).

Since the publication of Michelle Fine’s paper over 20 years ago, feminist scholars have continued to document the absence of desire from health and education programmes and call for its inclusion in work with young people in a range of national contexts (Lees 1986, 1994; Lenskyi 1990; Thompson 1990; Connell 1995; Holland et al. 1998; Tolman 2002; Bay-Cheng 2003; Allen 2004, 2005; Kiely 2005; Fine and McClelland 2006; Beasley 2008; Hirst 2008; Carmody 2009; Casale and Hanass-Hancock 2011). Historically, this work has focused on the absence of female heterosexual desire from sex education programmes. More recently, however, writers have documented the absence of queer desires from sex education programmes (Harrison, Hillier, and Walsh 1996; Rasmussen 2004; Allen 2007) and the absence of discourses of masculine desire that imagines male pleasure in diverse, holistic and equitable ways (Allen 2004, 2005, 2007; Beasley 2008). Louisa Allen (2005), for example, argues that although young men’s

(hetero)sexual desires appear to be given more space in sexuality education programmes than young women's, this is framed in a heteronormative discourse of 'growing up' and becoming interested in 'the opposite sex' (Allen 2005, 150). Allen argues that this discourse of awakening male (hetero)sexual desire, insinuated in information about wet dreams and erections, has regulatory, prescriptive effects for young men. With the absence of equivalent reference to young women's desire, such a discourse constitutes young men as predatory sexual subjects.

The study

This paper draws on research that sought to critically engage with these debates and consider what it might mean in practice for a researcher or a practitioner to create spaces within which to explore discourses of desire (Fine 1988) or erotics (Allen 2004) with young people. The study, conducted between 2009 and 2013, used an incremental, reflexive research design consisting of an initial stage of exploratory and pilot work, followed by three stages of fieldwork using survey, focus-group and biographical interview methods with young people aged 16–25. My aim was to document young people's understandings and experiences of 'good sex' and sexual pleasure and to reflexively interrogate the effectiveness of different research methods for creating safe spaces within which to engage young people in conversation about sexual pleasure.

Discussion in this paper focuses on one group discussion conducted during the second stage of fieldwork between six young men, a youth worker, a sexual health worker and myself about what counts as 'good' and 'bad' sex. To facilitate the discussion I used a set of quotation cards, each containing a quote from a young person about 'good sex' or sexual pleasure. For example, 'Good sex is when you are really relaxed and can be yourself. It doesn't matter what happens or what sounds you make. It's ok.' Or, 'Good sex has to last long. If he's getting pleasure and he stops and I'm there and I ain't got my pleasure yet – I'm like – "you're selfish".' The aim of this, and other focus groups conducted at this stage of the research, was to explore how young people talked about good sex in group settings and to use a reflexive, situated analysis of these group encounters to explore the potential of the group space as a research and practice setting for engaging young people in work around sexual pleasure.

The study was based in a small, densely populated local authority in North London. Like many inner-city London boroughs the area has an ethnically diverse, geographically mobile population and high levels of socio-economic inequality; it is listed as one of the most deprived areas in England (Islington Fairness Commission 2012) and hailed as London's original site of 'super-gentrification' (Butler and Lees 2006, 467). The focus group discussed in this paper, was held at a local youth centre with six young men who had been meeting weekly with a local youth worker (Steven¹) and an outreach sexual health worker (Graham) to take part in a series of sex education sessions. The young men were aged 17–21, all identified as heterosexual and were of diverse racial backgrounds. Several of the group were involved in the criminal justice system and most were involved in working informally or illegally from nearby housing estates in an area of high social inequality. Their youth worker Steven, who had known some of the young men for up to five years, informed me that none of the young men had been able to sustain any period of legal employment or training since leaving school aged 16.

The young men had been engaging in a participatory sexual health outreach programme developed by Steven and Graham in collaboration with the young men. When the sexual health outreach worker, Graham, asked the young men what topics they would

like to cover in these sessions, the young men had requested a session on pleasure, claiming they would like to know more about female sexual pleasure. I had met the young men previously whilst accompanying a local outreach youth worker to their estate and had asked if I could come and observe Graham delivering the session. On the morning of the observation, however, it was decided that I should lead the session instead, using the ‘good sex’ discussion card activity outlined above. The young men all consented to the discussion being recorded and signed written consent forms. Steven and Graham both participated in the discussion, providing the opportunity for me to both observe professional practice, as well as generating data on the young men’s sexual values and understandings of ‘good sex’. As others have noted, focus groups offer the researcher the opportunity to generate spoken data on a given topic, as well as observing participants interacting within a group or peer context, generating data on active social processes (Kitzinger 1994; Crossley 2002; Barbour 2009). In this paper, I focus on a single group intervention to enable me to look in detail at these processes, examining how the ‘local’ context of the group interaction is shaped by the ‘wider societal contexts’ (Phoenix 2008) of social exclusion, class and gender inequalities.

‘Speaking from experience’: authority, protest and play

Graham: Remember, you haven’t got to say anything-

[loud background talking among the group]

Graham: *[louder]* You haven’t got-

[louder talking among the group]

Graham: *[even louder]* Guys! You haven’t got to say anything about your personal experience!

Whiley: Why? That’s the whole point no? How do you know about having good sex if it’s not from personal experience?

Throughout the session, the young men used jokes, banter and vivid storytelling to engage in the discussion-based activity and explore ideas about good and bad sex. The discussion was animated and enthusiastic, lasting for 45 minutes until one of the young men told me he was ‘ready to go’. From the outset, the young men were defiant – refusing to adhere to the ‘ground rules’ that Graham and Steven attempted to establish about not talking over each other and not talking about other people’s sexual experiences, as we can see in the extract above. At the end of the session, the group decided it was time to leave, politely dismissive of Graham’s attempts to hold the group together and finish the discussion. One young man got up to leave and another reached over and switched off the audio recorder. As the young men were leaving, Steven and Graham told them that they had ‘done brilliantly’ and commented to me after the session that this was the longest session they had ever managed to have with the group.

Initially, the discussion took some time to get going as there were protests about the lack of food provided by the youth worker, complaints that the cups provided were not clean enough, jokes and sexual innuendos about the doughnuts I had provided, and protests about sexual health worker Graham’s reminder that they ‘haven’t got to say anything about [their] personal experiences’. The group were so animated that I initially held back on giving out the discussion cards, convinced that the young men needed no prompts to start a discussion about what counts as ‘good sex’. When I asked for their views, however, the young men struggled to respond and there was an awkward moment in

which Luke – the group joker – tried to tell a funny story but struggled to know what to say, leaving him open to ridicule from his peers. Once I had handed out the discussion cards, however, the discussion was thick and fast flowing. Whiley – the most vocal and dominant group member – started the discussion by selecting a card that he claimed to be ‘slightly true’. The card stated that girls can be ‘more emotionally attached’ to their sexual partners than boys (see above), which led to a long discussion about whether sex is better when you feel emotionally connected to your partner, why men might be less emotional about sex than women and whether a girl being in control during sex makes you ‘less of man’. I listened, asking occasional questions, whilst Graham and Steven probed the young men about why it’s harder for young men to ‘be emotional’ and why girls might be ‘more shy’ about taking control during sex.

In this way, the discussion card activity helped provide a structure to the discussion and enabled the group to explore and question ideas about sex, gender, contraception and respectability. Throughout the session, there was a playful tension between the young men’s banter and storytelling about the serious questions, comments and advice offered by Steven, Graham and myself, as we tried to pull the group away from their lively performance and towards the educational and research aims of the session.

As we can see in the extract below, when Graham and Steven attempt to educate the young men about the value of long-term relationships, the young men respond by telling funny stories about their own and each other’s experiences of casual sex (McGeeney 2015). In this way, the telling of personal stories emerges in this group as a form of protest and play; a way of amusing each other and contesting the authority of the professionals in the room:

Ryan: When you slept with a girl too many times, boy it’s dead.

Luke: Yeah, it’s dead.

Steven: But is that ‘cos you’re not emotionally attached to the girl, when it’s dead, or knowing the girl better and then you have some feelings towards her?

Whiley: Mark, let’s hear about your experience last night innit? How was it innit?

Mark: Cuz, it was cool. I was drunk. I swear, yeah.

Steven: We agreed, we agreed, we agreed not to talk about other people’s experiences!

Whiley: Why?

Mark: So what, I told them about it bare² times.

Luke: I told man about bare experiences, are you mad?!

In this extract the young men respond to Steven’s questioning of their sexual values by encouraging Mark to talk about his experiences ‘last night’. Despite Steven’s attempts to steer the group away from this personal sexual storytelling (‘we agreed, we agreed not to talk about other people’s experiences!’), they continue, refusing to accept that this common practice could be problematic or that it could be possible to have knowledge and authority about sex that is not based on embodied personal experience (Holland et al. 1998; McGeeney 2015). As Whiley exclaimed at the start of the discussion: ‘How do you know about having good sex if it’s not from personal experience?’

‘That’s how bad it was!’: stories of gender, class and disgust

Although the young men explored a number of ideas about good sex and sexual pleasure in this group discussion, talk was dominated by accounts of the pursuit of male sexual

pleasure in casual (hetero)sexual encounters. Whiley dominated the discussion and was the most prolific storyteller in the group, frequently telling stories of anonymous, casual sex encounters, as well as talking about his relationship with his girlfriend and the different rules and logic he applies to casual and committed relationship. To my surprise, however, Whiley's stories were largely not stories of good sex, sexual desire or successful masculine conquest, but accounts of bad sex and expressions of disgust. This was particularly evident in Whiley's story about a girl he and his friend Trevor both had sex with in a lift at a nearby local housing estate:

Whiley: [*to Fats*] Was you there when I brought that thing to [Oxford estate]? The thing that Trevor brought back from Kings Cross³?

Fats: And she stunk out the whole block?

Whiley: Bruv, she stunk out, I swear to you Graham yeah, I'm beating⁴ it, and I'm opening the lift door at the same time, that's how bad it was! This girl was absolutely foul. I just had to come out of there.

[*laughter*]

Steven: But had she had sex with someone else before you?

Whiley: Yeah Trevor, that bastard!

[*laughter*]

Whiley: That bastard violated the whole sin bruv!

[*laughter, all talking at once*]

Whiley: Uuuh she was stinking!

Ester: So why did you have sex with her?

Whiley: Cos obviously at first innit, cos as soon as I started you know like having sex with her obviously, the smell, just started coming up and I was like – nah – allow this bruv.⁵

Fats: Off fish.

Luke: Yeah off meat. From Dalston.⁶

Mark: Off meat from Dalston!!

During and after the group session I felt disturbed by this story and the misogynistic disgust that Whiley expressed for the faceless, nameless, young women he described. The specifics of the location and the vivid use of sensory, embodied metaphors in this story seemed to produce a disturbingly visceral account of the 'stinking' female body. As well as feeling disturbed, I also felt perplexed by this story; why would Whiley have sex with someone for whom he felt such repulsion? When I attempt to question Whiley's motivation for having sex with this woman ('Why, why did you have sex with her?') and to unravel where pleasure may feature in this story, Whiley returns the discussion to the vivid expressions of disgust ('the smell, just something started coming out'). I was left confused as to whether pleasure and desire formed part of this story at all and why Whiley and his peers would celebrate this story of 'bad sex' and subverted male sexual conquest.

After the group had finished, I discussed this interaction with the sexual health worker, Graham, who informed me that he had heard Whiley tell this story before. It appeared therefore that this story had particular currency for this group of young men and that part of the pleasure in the story was in its (re)telling – to the group who rewarded Whiley's disgust with their laughter and to the listening, questioning and un-amused practitioners.

In their discussion of young men's use of humour within secondary schools, Kehily and Nayak (1997) suggest that collective storytelling can play a central role in framing classroom humour and consolidating versions of heterosexual masculinity. In their ethnographic study, the researchers found that certain events would be reinvoked by young men for the 'shared pleasure of mutual retelling', elevating the event to a mythic status that became a key reference point against which young men would make sense of their identity within the school and the peer group context (Kehily and Nayak 1997, 76). They use the example of a story told to them by a group of young people about a student who made a 'cock' (penis) out of clay and showed it to a nun who worked at the school. They argue that the collective (re)telling of this story within the peer group context functions to consolidate a set of sexual values and version of hypermasculinity, acting as a regulatory reminder and performative rehearsal for desirable behaviour within the male peer group (Kehily and Nayak 1997). Whiley's story of the 'slag' in the lift seemed to function in this group in a similar way to enable and consolidate a particular version of hypermasculinity predicated on repeated casual (hetero)sexual encounters. It also, however, makes humour from self-abasement, generating collective expressions of humour and disgust that delight the group whilst also marking out the moral authority of the young men in relation to the 'stinking' bodies of their 'foul' female partners and peers (Miller 1997; Ahmed 2004). As Sara Ahmed (2004) argues, disgust is performative, binding together the speaker and the audience in shared condemnation of the disgusting object, who in this story is Whiley's female sexual partner and peer (Miller 1997; Skeggs 2005; Tyler 2008).

As well as understanding this story – and the focus group encounter as a whole – as an example of gender and sexual identity work, I would argue that this was a performance of authority and protest that was classed as well as gendered. Throughout the focus group, the young men made regular claims to have done the 'bad' thing – 'I've had sex with bare slags' (Whiley), 'I beat on the first date yesterday!' (Mark) – whilst also relishing in visceral misogynistic language such as 'next bitch', 'slag' and 'grease bag'. Whilst sometimes such claims may have been uttered defensively, to establish status within the peer group, the young men also seemed to revel in their 'bad' language and 'foul' sexual exploits as if enjoying performing their transgression for the three adult professionals, each other and the audio recorder. In his sociolinguistic study of black inner-city youth, William Labov (1972) describes the ways in which the bad words and images used in misogynistic 'mother insults' are used so frequently and with such familiarity that the vividness of images such as 'your mother ate fried dickheads' (324) disappears. Labov suggests that the meaning of these sounds would be entirely lost without reference to middle-class norms and are used as a deliberate way of arousing 'disgust and revulsion among those committed to the "good" standards of middle class society' (324). In her study of working class femininity, Beverly Skeggs (2004, 2005) argues that one of the ways in which a classed position of judgment can be maintained is through assigning the other as 'immoral, repellent, abject, worthless, disgusting, even disposable' (Skeggs 2005, 977). Following from this, one of the most effective ways to deflect being devalued is 'to enjoy that for which you know you are being condemned' (976) – this involves not contesting or deriding authority but refusing the authority of the judgment and the value system from which that judgment emerges.

Whiley explicitly directs his mythic story to the sexual health worker Graham ('I swear to you Graham') and part of the humour in his performance is perhaps the way in which the story – told in this way – subverts the authority of sexual health discourses voiced by Graham during the discussion and the value system from which this emerges. Whiley's story enables him to educate Graham about bad sex, and in doing so he claims a position of

authority in the peer group, in relation to Graham, youth worker Steven and me and as a moral authority on this young woman's sexuality and body. As the young men were leaving the room at the end of the group, one of them remarked, 'Ester will never come back again' – apparently aware, although I had not voiced this in the group, that I would object to their stories and arguably confident that their attempt to make themselves objectionable and to refuse the authority of my judgement had succeeded.

'You know what type of girls I look for?': stories of desire and (dis)respect

My analysis of Whiley's story of the 'foul' girl in the lift suggests that there are implicit class, as well as gender, inequalities at play within the group context. In the following extract, these class inequalities are made explicit as Steven and the young men seem to momentarily acknowledge the young men's socially excluded and disadvantaged location:

Luke: You know what type of girls I look for? Them sort of women that walk out of [the underground] station at half-five.

Steven (youth worker): And what do you think they will see in *you*?

[laughter and talking all at once, calling out 'at half-five!']

Steven: For what reason? What's the difference then?

Luke: I dunno, their upper-class innit? Working secretary looking, you know the ones I'm saying?

Steven: So because they are working?

Ester: What, they're rich-richer? You mean or?

Steven: Or they're working?

Graham: Or is it, is it a state of mind? Because they're working it shows something about them, that maybe?

Ryan: That they got self-respect innit.

Whiley: Yeah, like more and more girls these days are just like on the roads, like what are you really doing, they're just like out!

Luke: Yeah, yeah, I want an older woman, I want an older woman!

Whiley: Like those two girls from Stevenage,⁷ what do they do?

[laughter]

Whiley: They come down from Stevenage, they go jump on the [bus], they go from Camden to Holloway, to Camden to Holloway and Finsbury Park and just get battered out along the whole bus lines.⁸

Fats: Disgusting sight, disgusting.

Whiley: But what do they do?

Fats: That's why I don't want to have a daughter. Things like that. That's appalling.

Graham: So, a girl who works is more like – a girl who *doesn't* work is more likely to sleep around do you think?

Whiley: Yeah, a girl that don't work, just like, on the road, what's she doing, she obviously more likely to just be stepped out, sleeping about and that innit? A girl that's obviously working, whose got something – obviously something to do with her time. Like that would be the girl that would be more likely to be wanting a relationship and a proper life innit? Not just going around, sleeping about.

In this account, the young men reserve their disgust for women who, like themselves, are young and jobless, with nothing to do but spend time 'on the road' and 'sleeping around'. Here we see a familiar 'discourse of respectability' (Skeggs 1997, 1) being evoked to make classed distinctions between women as the 'disgusting sight' of working-class female sexual excess is contrasted with the respectability and 'proper life' of older, 'upper-class' professional women. This discussion emerged in response to my question about how the young men think their sexual relationships might change as they get older. In imagining their futures, the young men play with images of professional and class respectability, looking to distance themselves from their young working-class, jobless peers.

I remember being shocked by Steven's comment to Luke – 'What do you think they will see in *you*?' – that seemed to slip out before Steven could stop himself. Although the boys smoothed over the awkward moment with their laughter, Steven's comment laid bare the gaping inequality between the boys' current social exclusion and the 'culture of professionalism' (Young 1990, 58), which they aspire to access through their future sexual relationships. Steven's comment also revealed the inequalities of age and professionalism that structured the power dynamic between Steven and the boys that could not be so easily dislodged beyond the boundaries of this group encounter; although the young men are able to claim authority within this peer group setting – choosing when to start and end the session, claiming respectability and value among their peers – this sense of authority and esteem may not translate easily into other social and institutional spaces.

Ryan's suggestion that professional, working women have more self-respect seems to momentarily acknowledge the hierarchy of respectability that positions the young men and their young, repellent, jobless, female sexual partners as inferior and excluded from respectable, desirable, middle-class professionalism. Whiley quickly closes down this uncomfortable moment, however, through telling a new hyperbolic story of disgusting female excess, thus re-establishing the young men's – precarious and situationally specific – moral authority on the boundaries of good, respectable sex.

'You gotta get the rose petals on the floor': stories of female pleasure and desire

In this encounter, possibilities for exploring alternative accounts of good sex to the 'quick beat' in the local park or housing estate emerged in response to my questions about female sexual pleasure. For example, when I ask the young men 'how do you give a woman pleasure' the group, led by Fats, throw out a stream of sensual images and sounds to collectively construct a pastiche scene reminiscent of romantic comedy or erotica that delights the whole group:

Fats: First of all, set the mood right.

[laughter and talking]

Ester: OK. Go on.

Fats: Turn out the lights, put a one, two candles here and there [Ryan: I know that, I know that!], you gotta getting the lavender going.

[loud laughter and clapping and exclamations of 'the lavender!']

Ester: Go on, carry on, carry on.

Fats: You gotta get the rose petals on the floor.

Luke: Boom, what else? What else?

Fats: Have a bubble bath there ... Spaghetti Bolognese with the meatballs.

Luke: You get the bubble bath running, you get the slow mellow beat marches playing in the background, like the music is bare low [*sings*] – with yooooou.

Ryan: Jazzy beats.

Fats: Then when she steps into the yard, she knows what month and time it is. And from there, that's it, isn't it. She should be aroused from morning.

Ryan: From morning, yeah.

Here the young men draw, not on their own experiences or scenes from their local communities, but on selected images from popular culture. The dominant pattern of affective practice (Wetherell 2012) is no longer one of humour and disgust, but one of sensuality, humour and playful fun. A similar pattern emerged when I asked the young men how they would feel if their female partner had an orgasm during sex. Rather than responding with a personal sexual story of what happened 'last night' or 'last week', Luke draws on the metaphor of Simba from the children's Disney film *The Lion King*:

Ester: So if you were, if the girl you're sleeping with has an orgasm, how does that make you feel?

Fats: Good for her.

Steven: Just good for her?

Luke: No, it does, it does give you a little, a little, makes you feel like a *man*!

Fats: Don't be fucking special man don't ...

Luke: You see where in the lion king ...

[*loud aughter*]

Luke: ... Simba ... with the light shining on you.

[*laughter*]

Luke: That's the goal innit, that's the goal of ...

[*laughter*]

Luke's comic performance delights the group and enables him to defy ridicule from Fats and present a vision of how to incorporate ideas about female pleasure into the dominant group narrative of male sexual prowess and power. As these examples suggest, invitations to talk about female pleasure and desire in this group encounter were met with playful explorations of power, pleasure and sensuality, disrupting the more frequent expressions of misogynistic disgust. Perhaps the young men did not have any personal sexual stories of female pleasure that they wanted to share in this context, or perhaps they were humouring me – creating a comic, sensual performance that could be understood and enjoyed by someone from outside their community.

In both instances, these comic performances opened up space for the young men to go on to explore the relationship between gender and 'pace and power' as the young men were prompted by Graham and Simon to explore questions about gender, penetration, foreplay and the timing and sequencing of sexual encounters. This could suggest, as others have claimed, that asking questions about female sexual pleasure is disruptive (McClelland and Fine 2008), bringing a frequently hidden topic into the discussion. It was also the topic that the young men had told Graham and Steven they most wanted to cover in the series of sexual health outreach session. These were brief conversations, however, and the space was too chaotic to fully engage in unpicking some of the troubling gender and sexual norms at play

in this group or to create opportunities for the young men to listen to voices that talked of different kinds of personal experience from the 'quick beat' in the park.

Conclusion: creating safe spaces

I started this paper by asking what happens when you put together a group of young people and ask them to talk with each other and with practitioners about pleasure. Why would a researcher or practitioner do this in their work? And what would be the benefits of doing so for young people, for researchers and practitioners? This paper provides one example of what could happen when we engage in this work as researcher/practitioners with a group of young, heterosexual, 'hard-to-reach' young men, detailing the ways in which what is possible to say publically about sex and pleasure is shaped by peer and professional relationships, local and wider social contexts and inequalities (Phoenix 2008). In this particular group, we can see that asking young people to talk about good sex creates a space for storytelling, protest and vivid expressions of disgust for the young female working-class sexual body. There is also space for fleetingly exploring sensuality, power and female pleasure, as well as the young men's experiences of living with social exclusion in an area of higher social inequality.

The debates set out at the beginning of this paper suggest that engaging young men and young women in critical discussion about sexual pleasure could create opportunities to explore more diverse, holistic and gender equitable accounts of gender and sexuality than those currently offered in mainstream media, pornography and sexuality education programmes. The data from this and other focus groups conducted as part of this study suggest that inviting young people to talk about good sex and sexual pleasure can provide opportunities to move beyond limited public health agendas concerned with preventing sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies (Ingham 2005). The study suggests that there is an appetite and enthusiasm for engaging with this topic and the potential to use structured activities to explore a range of challenging and contested moral issues and experiences.

The data also suggest, however, that there are considerable challenges for practitioners and young people in engaging in this work within peer groups and communities with high levels of social inequality. The adult-led model of work elicited rebellious performances from the young men, making it difficult to challenge passionately held views or to engage in reflective discussion. For the young men, the hypermasculine performance and banter at play meant that they were unable to talk in this group setting about a range of emotional experiences and desires without facing ridicule from their peers. For all of us this meant working with – rather than against – the performative and humorous mode and using personal experience and comic performance as the starting point for discussion and challenge.

Although there were opportunities for the group participants to challenge and question each other, there were also opportunities for collusion and reinforcement of oppressive social norms. The three professionals in the room struggled to build and maintain a 'safe space' to conduct the work required; conventional ground rules, such as respecting and listening to each other, maintaining each other's confidentiality and no discriminatory or oppressive language, were openly flouted and difficult to maintain. Keen to engage and support these vulnerable young men, the professionals in the room rewarded the young men with our attention, laughter and approval.

Whilst participating in this focus group, my main impression was not *what* was said but the desire, banter and hypermasculinity (Kehily and Nayak 1997) that were performed

for each other, for me, for the two male practitioners and for the frequently referenced audio recorder. The sheer noise and energy of this group was something that I enjoyed. I found the young men funny and entertaining and when I listen back to the recording I can hear myself laughing – something that I now feel uncomfortable about when I read the transcripts and explore the shockingly loud accounts of misogynistic disgust and the quieter, sadder story of social exclusion. In my analysis of the focus group data I have tried to hold on to my initial impression of this group and find ways of capturing this sense of performance, energy and fun in my analysis and reading this encounter as more than just a ‘sexist hangover’ (Walkerdine 2011).

Focus group method worked to capture the ways in which social norms are created, contested and embedded in youth sexual cultures (see Crossley 2002; Barbour 2009), but as a one-off group encounter it was unable to document the varied dimensions of these young men’s lives or document changes in their experiences, values or relationships. Unlike Steven and Graham, I had no ongoing relationship with these young men and was unable to return to engage with them in a longer piece of research/practice or find out about the multi-faceted dimensions of their lives and relationships. Reporting on this kind of encounter therefore runs the risk of further stigmatising the young men involved, capturing only the loud performance of misogyny and disgust and unable to document stories of potential vulnerability, care and respect.

The potential of our methods to elicit and potentially collude with stories of power and oppression does not suggest that we should shy away from attempting to engage hard-to-reach young men in the ‘pleasure project’. It does, however, point to the need for sustained programmes of work in which it is possible to create the safe spaces required to move beyond the odd ‘challenge here and there’ (Lloyd 1997, 83) and engage in processes of personal and political change. Thinking beyond the ‘limitations of method’, this study suggests that this will require researcher/practitioners and young people to be open and ready for the unpredictable, contested and highly emotional nature of these encounters (Gillies and Robinson 2010; Allen and Carmody 2012). Further, it points to the importance of participatory and community-based research/action projects (e.g. Cahill, Rios-Moore, and Threatts 2008) with groups of young men that are able to confront and engage with social inequality, grounded in a community and social justice agenda.

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Notes

1. All names provided in this paper are pseudonyms.
2. ‘Bare’ is a colloquial term for many.
3. Kings Cross is an area of central London.

4. 'Beating' is slang for having sex.
5. 'Allow this' is a colloquial phrase meaning 'forget it' or to leave something alone.
6. Dalston is an area of East London where there is a local food market.
7. Stevenage is a town approximately 30 miles from London. Camden, Holloway and Finsbury Park are all areas of north London.
8. 'Battery' is a colloquial term for having group sex. Whiley implies that the young women have sex with lots of different men at different locations along a bus route.

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Résumé

Certains arguments persuasifs plaident en faveur d'une prise en compte du plaisir sexuel par les programmes de santé sexuelle destinés aux jeunes. L'un d'eux suggère que cette prise en compte permettrait de fournir aux jeunes des récits sur le genre et la sexualité, plus critiques et holistiques que ceux qui sont présentés par les médias populaires, la pornographie et les programmes

d'éducation sexuelle. En exploitant les données d'une étude multi-méthodes sur les compréhensions et les expériences de « bons rapports sexuels » chez des jeunes, cet article examine les opportunités de participation de jeunes hommes à un travail de groupe critique sur le plaisir sexuel, dans le cadre de la recherche et des programmes d'éducation. L'article propose un compte-rendu réfléchi d'un groupe de discussion thématique conduit avec des jeunes hommes hétérosexuels et deux éducateurs. Il explore certains des défis rencontrés lors de l'établissement de relations avec des jeunes hommes et de la création « d'espaces sûrs » favorisant la participation critique à l'éducation à la sexualité dans des contextes sociaux inégaux. Dans cette étude de cas, la discussion dirigée par des adultes a suscité des performances rebelles et « hyper-masculines » qui réduisent à néant l'opportunité d'un débat critique et réfléchi. Bien qu'il existe certaines opportunités pour un travail critique à mener au-delà des programmes limités de santé publique ou d'éducation sexuelle dans le cadre scolaire, il existe aussi un espace de collusion et de renforcement des normes sociales oppressives. La conclusion de l'article consiste en un examen des possibilités pour les recherches et les pratiques futures.

Resumen

Existe una serie de argumentos persuasivos que explican el motivo del por qué se debería incluir el placer sexual en el trabajo sobre la salud sexual con jóvenes, entre ellos el argumento de que esto aportaría a los jóvenes información más crítica y holística sobre género y sexualidad que la mostrada en los medios populares, la pornografía y el currículo educativo actual en materia sexual. En este artículo se examinan las posibilidades de que hombres jóvenes participen en tareas críticas en grupo sobre el placer sexual en contextos de investigación y educación, a partir de un estudio con métodos combinados sobre los conceptos y las experiencias de los jóvenes con el “sexo bueno”. En el artículo se ofrece un relato reflexivo de un grupo de debate llevado a cabo con un grupo de hombres jóvenes heterosexuales y dos educadores de jóvenes. Se exploran algunos de los retos a la hora de establecer relaciones con hombres jóvenes y crear “espacios seguros” para participar en una educación sexual crítica en contextos socialmente desiguales. En este estudio de caso, los debates dirigidos por adultos suscitan rebelión y comportamientos “hiper-masculinos” que niegan la oportunidad de tener debates críticos o reflexivos. Si bien existen algunas oportunidades de llevar a cabo un trabajo crítico que va más allá de los programas limitados de educación sexual en la sanidad pública o los colegios, también hay espacio para la connivencia y el refuerzo de normas sociales opresivas. El artículo concluye imaginando las posibilidades de futuras investigaciones y prácticas.